

Testimony for Public Hearing
Barriers to Education Globally: Getting Girls in the Classroom
Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Global Women's Issues
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Kakenya Ntaiya, PhD
Founder and President
Kakenya Center for Excellence
Narok County, Kenya

Good morning Foreign Relations Subcommittee members. My name is Kakenya Ntaiya and I am the Founder and President of the Kakenya Center for Excellence.

The Kakenya Center for Excellence is an international NGO based in my village in Kenya that educates and empowers vulnerable girls in rural Kenya. I am here to tell you two stories about the opportunities we create when we educate girls. One is my personal story that inspired the creation of the Kakenya Center for Excellence. The other is the story of Faith one of our fourth grade girls.

I was engaged at 5 years old to a boy in my village. The traditional path for me was to undergo Female Genital Cutting (FGC) and to be married while I was a teenager, but I really wanted to go to school and be a teacher. Girls in my village are prepared from a young age to be mothers. Just like all the girls in my village, I was required to gather firewood, fetch water from the

river, take care of my younger siblings, cook and keep the house clean. After all that, we could go to school until we were cut.

I wanted something different. I negotiated with my father that I would undergo FGC if he allowed me to continue with school. He took the deal. After I finished high school, which is very unusual for many girls in my village, I negotiated with the men in my village to come to school in America. I promised that I would come back and use what I learned to help my village. Many boys had come to school in America but they never came back to the village. I was allowed by the elders in my community to leave my village and study in America.

In 2009, while a student at the University of Pittsburgh, I worked to open the first primary school for girls in my village with the help of many friends and supporters. I was tired of hearing about young girls being forced into early marriages, or subject to FGC, or left at home to care for their siblings and not given an opportunity to go to school. We started a boarding school for 4th-8th grade girls that has helped 277 girls get a good education while also teaching them about their health and their rights.

We started a health and leadership training program that serves 3,000 girls and boys each year. We have expanded beyond a boarding school because the demand for our programs is so great. We don't have the capacity to serve the hundreds of girls who show up for the 40 slots we have in our boarding school each year. I am also pleased to share that we continue to support graduates of our boarding school while they continue on to high school. Today, we are supporting 95 high school girls with

scholarships, mentoring and trainings so that they can continue their progress.

Faith's story is one that inspires me and frightens me because of all the girls living in extreme poverty and hopelessness that we are not able to enroll in our boarding school. Faith is nine years old. She has five siblings and ten stepbrothers and sisters. Her father is married to three wives and Faith's mother is the third wife. Last year in December, Faith got up very early and asked several members of her family to bring her to enroll in our school. Her father said no. Her mother said no because she needed to earn money to feed the family that day. Faith stole an egg and sold it in the market to buy a pencil. She walked 4 miles to our school over very rough roads. We have hundreds of girls and their families on our campus on enrollment day. I did not realize that Faith was all alone – no family member had come with her – until she broke down during the family interview. After we got her calmed down, she said that her family didn't have any money but she had done all she could to come to get into school. I told her that she would be able to come to our school and start the 4th grade.

The next day she brought her Mother because her mother told her she wouldn't be able to go to school because they didn't have money for school. I told her mother to bring her to school because we would take care of the rest.

I think of the determination and the potential of a girl like Faith who does what it takes to get into school. I think determination like that will create

new female leaders in Kenya that can help us face some of the challenges in our country and around the world. How many talents are we wasting when we don't put resources into girls' education?

One of my favorite things to watch is the pride of the fathers as they watch their daughters learn, as they watch them get the highest marks on the national exam. As they watch them stand up for themselves and plan their futures as doctors and lawyers. Fathers are the ones out front saying our girls will not be subjected to Female Genital Cutting. Our fathers are the ones convincing other fathers that there is a better future for the girl child.

The Kakenya Center for Excellence is changing fathers, changing mothers and changing some of the deep rooted cultural practices that hinders girls from continuing with school in rural communities in Kenya. We have an effective model to share with other rural communities who have high rates of early forced marriage and FGC.

Senators, you play an important role in the success of the Kakenya Center for Excellence and other NGOs like ours who are fighting traditional cultural practices. We have been able to assemble private donors to educate future leaders in Africa. It will take many more resources, including the support of the U.S. government, to scale our models and share our strategies with other rural communities in Africa and beyond. A girl who is educated has impact beyond her village. She has an impact on the world.

Thank you for the opportunity to share the Kakenya Center for Excellence,
Faith's and my story with you.

Sincerely,

Kakenya Ntaiya